

The Washington Post  
**TRAVEL**



CAYCE CLIFFORD FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

## In any tongue, an emotional family return to Bulgaria

BY DINA MISHEV

Plovdiv, a city built on six hills rising from the plains between the Balkan and Rhodope mountains, is Bulgaria's first European Capital of Culture, an annual designation given by the European Commission to highlight the diversity of arts and culture. It is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities on the continent.

Walking around it, it's all I can do not to cry in gratitude, wonder and happiness. I am on a family trip that I never expected to happen: my dad, mom, brother and myself visiting the country where my father was born. He lived here until he was 14, when he and several family members fled as the Communist Party grew in influence across the country.

Emotions follow me 125 miles northeast of Plovdiv to Veliko  
 SEE BULGARIA ON F3

## Wine country's food pairing

For 25 years, Thomas Keller has graced Yountville, Calif., with his genius

BY MARY BETH ALBRIGHT

I recommend approaching Yountville in the dark. Nighttime driving conceals Napa Valley's Mayacamas Mountains and hillsides, so I wake in my hotel surprised and enchanted by the vineyard landscape. ¶ Darkness also helps me imagine the time before Napa Valley became an international wine destination. The industry ran on faith between the winery-decimating plague of Prohibition 100 years ago and the 1976 Judgment of Paris, when Napa wines beat French wines in a blind taste test. The latter event started a worldwide Napa Valley wine obsession that continues today. ¶ And for Yountville, a town nestled in southern Napa Valley, the opening 25 years ago this weekend of chef Thomas Keller's the French Laundry began its time of flourishing. Keller turned the French Laundry into an international bucket-list destination, a place where people who can't get (or can't afford) reservations take selfies in front of the sign.

SEE NAPA VALLEY ON F4

A hot air balloon hovers over the Domaine Chandon winery in Yountville, Calif.

### NAVIGATOR

Make sure to read your travel contracts before you hit the road. F2

### GO HERE, NOT THERE

In New Orleans, a genteel respite from Bourbon Street. F2

### INDIA

Escape the heat at these mountaintop vacation destinations. F5



# Father's homeland is worth the visit

BULGARIA FROM FI

Tarnovo. Here, over Bolyarka beers on a large terrace overlooking the imposing Asenevsi Monument — four larger-than-life-size mounted horsemen around a 30-foot-tall sword — we agree this city should be Bulgaria's next European Capital of Culture.

Veliko Tarnovo was the country's capital for several hundred years and reigned as one of Europe's centers of arts and culture in the Middle Ages. (It's fine to just call it "Tarnovo," which is what most locals do; veliko, which means "great" in Bulgarian, was only added to the city's name in 1965.) Tarnovo was the first Bulgarian city to be written about in National Geographic; a story about it ran in the magazine's October 1907 issue. Its history goes back five millennia and its cobblestoned, red-roofed homes and businesses spill down a steep natural amphitheater created by a sharp bend in the Yantra River.

## Reclaiming a heritage

Growing up, there wasn't much Bulgarian culture in our suburban house, but there was banitsa, a flaky, cheesy traditional Bulgarian pastry, and nightly Bulgarian lessons for my younger brother and myself from my dad. My mom, a Baltimorean whose sweet tooth crossed cultures, never stopped baking the former, but the latter ended one night in second grade when I told my dad, "This is your language, not mine."

When he lived in Bulgaria, my dad never went to Plovdiv or Veliko Tarnovo. His family lived in Perilovets, a farming village in the country's northwestern corner, near its borders with Romania and present-day Serbia. He did go to Vidin, a port city on the Danube River about 30 miles from his village that, in a cart



DINA MISHEV FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The city of Plovdiv in Bulgaria is built on six hills, including Nebet Tepe, where a group of people gather to watch the sunset.

pulled by oxen Belyo ("white") and Sin ("blue") was an all-night journey from the family farm.

Veliko Tarnovo is almost 200 miles farther from his village than Vidin. Plovdiv is about 50 miles more distant. My dad learned about the long histories of both cities in school, but says the idea of seeing either in person never crossed his mind.

In 2003, when I was in my mid-20s, I spent two weeks in Bulgaria with my dad, but didn't make it much farther from his village than he had as a kid. On that trip, my initial meeting with every second cousin, family friend and former neighbor who hadn't fled the country (and who didn't speak English) started with them excitedly greeting me in Bulgarian. I smiled in what I hoped was an apologetic manner as my dad explained I had no idea what they had just said.

An argument could be made that my father shouldn't have listened to a 7-year-old complaining about language lessons. Still I can imagine "this is your language, not mine" hurting so much that it made sense to wait for me to come back to him when I was interested. Except I never did. By 2003, all I could do was recite the first seven letters of the Cyrillic alphabet.

Every introduction left me feeling I had let my dad down.

That trip ended with me glad to have put faces to names of these distant family members and to have seen where my dad grew up. Since he left, his family's house had been razed and a modest, one-floor, village hall built in its place. The well he fetched water from and a couple of trees he climbed remained. I was in no hurry to return.

It wasn't until after both my dad and I were several years out from brutal-but-successful treatment for cancer (melanoma for him; breast for me) and he was 82 that I decided I wanted to go back. Fifteen years had passed. A more mature traveler and daughter (although still unable to speak Bulgarian), I instigated the trip. My brother Rob and my mom, neither of whom had been to Bulgaria before, quickly announced they were coming too. "We have to make it the ultimate homecoming for dad — to share his birthplace and heritage with his American family, all together," my mom said. "It just has to be all of us!"

SEE BULGARIA ON F6

## If you go

### WHERE TO STAY

#### Hotel Evmolpia

4 Pernik St., Plovdiv  
011-359-32-957-795  
hotelevmolpia.com

A boutique hotel in the city's Old Town with antique-filled rooms and a daily happy hour with free wine and cheese; walking distance from many of the city's historic sites. Double rooms, including breakfast, from about \$67 per night.

#### 8½ Art Guest House

15-17 Gen. Gurko St., Plovdiv  
011-359-32-396-699  
artguesthouse.com/en

Seven whimsical rooms, some with balconies, in the heart of Old Town. Rooms, including breakfast, from about \$81 per night.

#### Hotel Gurko

33 Gurko St., Veliko Tarnovo  
011-359-887-858-965  
hotel-gurko.com

A 21-room hotel constructed of stone and timber in Veliko Tarnovo's Old Town with rooms overlooking the Asenevsi Monument, Yantra River and Tsarevets. Rooms, including breakfast, from about \$53 per night.

### WHERE TO EAT

#### Hemingway Restaurant

10 Gurko St., Plovdiv  
011-359-89-449-0636  
hemingway.bg/en

Traditional Bulgarian ingredients like veal, lamb and peppers are prepared with a modern and sophisticated twist; there's also a wide selection of Bulgarian cheeses and wines, including some made from the indigenous mavrud grape. Entrees from about \$8.

#### Pavaj

7 Zlatarska St., Plovdiv  
011-359-87-811-1876  
facebook.com/pavaj.plovdiv

Regional specialties like spare ribs and stuffed eggplant highlight local ingredients in a cozy yet trendy space in the Kapana District. If you're going to try rakia, considered Bulgaria's national drink, this is the place to do it because of its large selection. Make sure to save room for dessert. Entrees from about \$8.

#### Cat & Mouse

14 Hristo Dyukmedzhiev St.,



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#### Plovdiv

011-359-878-313-995  
catandmouse.bg/bar

Several beers, including locally brewed ones, are on tap at this bar specializing in craft brews; more than 100 beers from around the world — Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Britain, Serbia — available by the bottle. Beers from about \$3.

#### Gurko Tavern

33 Gurko St., Veliko Tarnovo  
011-359-887-858-965  
hotel-gurko.com

Hearty, meaty meals like spicy pork stew, bread stuffed with chicken and pork ribs with polenta in a cozy, stone-floored tavern on a cobblestone street above the Yantra River and opposite the Asenevsi Monument. Open 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily. Entrees from about \$6.

#### Restaurant Asenevci

7 Stamboliiski St., Veliko Tarnovo  
011-359-88-918-0111  
restorantasenevci.com

Sit in front of the fireplace (winter) or on the terrace (summer) and enjoy Bulgarian nouveau cuisine as well as pastas and pizza. Open noon to 3 p.m. daily for lunch and 5:30 to 9 p.m. for dinner. Entrees from about \$7.

### WHAT TO DO

#### Free Plovdiv Tour

Tours start at Plovdiv City Hall, 4000 Tsentar  
011-359-886-993-977  
freeplovdivtour.com

Local guides lead two-hour walking tours (in English) to many of the city's most historic sites while giving a history lesson of the area. Tours start at 11 a.m. and 6 p.m., daily from May through September;

open at 2 p.m. daily from October through April. No reservations required. Free.

#### Ancient Theatre of Philippopolis

4000 Tsentar, Plovdiv  
011-359-03-262-1040

A landslide in 1970 revealed a Roman theater in the middle of Plovdiv's Old Town that was built in the 1st century. After a lengthy restoration, this theater is among the best-preserved Roman theaters in existence. Concerts and events are held here in the summer. Open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily April through October and 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. November through March. Entrance about \$3 for all ages.

#### Bulgaria Wine Tours

Plovdiv  
011-359-888-487-113  
bulgariawinetours.com

Half-, full- and multiday tours in English, with tastings, to several of the 20-some boutique wineries in the surrounding Thracian Valley. Tours pick you up at your hotel and are available daily with advance reservation; custom tours also available. Tours run from about \$72 (half-day) to \$95 per person for excursions with three or more people. Otherwise, about \$90 to \$112.

### INFORMATION

visitbulgaria.com

D.M.

For the author's full list of Bulgaria recommendations, visit [wapo.st/travel](http://wapo.st/travel)

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# 'Hons n' Roses' Bulgarian tour stops at cultural hot spots

BULGARIA FROM F3

I had matching gray, long-sleeve T-shirts made. Screen printed on the back, in a nod to our Bulgarian and Baltimorean roots, is a riff on the Guns N' Roses logo: "Hons n' Roses — The Mishevs do Bulgaria." ("Hons" are a very Baltimore thing; Bulgaria is well known for its rose perfume.)

The "Hons n' Roses" tour includes seeing Plovdiv and Tarnovo before ending with a visit to Perilovets and the family.

## Wine, beer and history

Since it is the Capital of Culture, Plovdiv is our first stop. Our first destination in the city is a gatehouse at the entrance to the city's Old Town. Only local residents, business owners and guests at the several boutique hotels here are allowed to drive this UNESCO World Heritage site's narrow, cobbled streets lined with 19th-century homes built in the top-heavy Bulgarian National Revival style. (At the time, taxes were assessed on a home's footprint, so the ground level was made as small as possible.)

Checking into the Hotel Evmolpia — Evmolpia was this city's name when it was a Thracian settlement in the Late Bronze Age (1200- 500 B.C.) — we're offered local cheese and wine. Archaeological evidence shows grapes have been grown and wine made in this area for more than 3,000 years. Today, there are about 20 vineyards and wineries within an hour's drive of Plovdiv.

At Hotel Evmolpia, I try a red made from the local grape variety mavrud. It's heavy and I taste cherries and blackberries.

There are also local chardonnays, merlots and cabernet sauvignons available.

Adjacent to the Old Town is the formerly derelict, now trendy, Kapana District, a maze of tight, winding streets. (Kapana means "the trap" in Bulgarian.) We quickly get lost, and that's fine. Around one corner there's the Hipster Hostel and an art gallery selling products made from felt. Around the next corner is a giant spray-painted mural of an alligator with a heart-shaped diamond in its toothy mouth being ridden by a bored-looking man wearing a turtle-neck.

It is one of my mom's life quests to try as many beers as possible. So when we turn yet another of Kapana's corners and find Cat & Mouse (Kotka i Mishka in Bulgarian), a bar with more than 100 beers from around the world and three of its own brews, we stop. Tasting each of the latter, you'd never know the bar and brewery was founded to finance a website dedicated to independent journalism, Pod Tepeto ("Under the Hill"), and not only out of a love of beer.

We settle in with our drinks at an outside table from which we can see three different spray-painted murals, two boutiques selling a mix of locally made clothing and home accessories and three or four art galleries/studios. The businesses are on the ground levels of colorful, two-story buildings with pennant flags strung between them. The building next to Cat & Mouse is a cafe named Central Perk, styled to look like the cafe of that name from the TV show "Friends." Latte- and espresso-sipping customers speaking French, German, English and Bulgarian relax here in sofas and armchairs.

Bulgarians have a word for this scene: "aylyak." Aylyak is a word taken from Turkish; in that lan-



TOP: Veliko Tarnovo is located more than 200 miles from where the author's father grew up. It is known for red-roofed homes, cobblestone streets and the Yantra River.

ABOVE: The author's father, who was born in Bulgaria but fled the country at 14, looks at the Asenevtsi Monument, which commemorates the uprising that led to the country's liberation.

PHOTOS BY DINA MISHEV FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

guage it means doing nothing or being idle. In Bulgaria, aylyak is slightly different; here it refers to a lifestyle that cultivates and celebrates an easygoing, unhurried attitude (as in, the opposite of farm life). Within Bulgaria, it is generally held that Plovdivians do aylyak best.

While locals love aylyak, it is also blamed for the delay in the refurbishment of Plovdiv's Central Square, which was not finished in time for the Capital of Culture opening ceremony in January. I think it makes more sense to blame the Romans, Macedonians or Thracians though: It seems you cannot dig a hole in Plovdiv without hitting a ruin from one of these civilizations. Beneath almost the entire one-mile length of the shopping and pedestrian street Knyaz Alexander I in the center of the city is a Roman stadium built at the beginning of the 2nd century when the city was known as Trimontium. Several sections of it have been excavated, including a seating area you can see in the basement of the clothing store H&M and, in the middle of Dzhu-maya Square, colonnades and the stadium's northern end. For better or worse, most of Bulgaria's ruins are eminently accessible and here you can sit in the same seats where, 2,000 years ago, 30,000 people gathered to watch chariot races.

Uphill from our hotel is the Ancient Theater of Philippopolis. Built at the end of the 1st century, it was used for performances for several hundred years, abandoned after a fire and forgotten until a landslide in the 1970s revealed a section of it. The Bulgarian Conservation School spent 10 years restoring it and in 1981 it reopened as a performance space that has become renowned for its acoustics. Sadly there are no rock concerts, operas or master Zumba classes being held while we're here.

This fall, restoration work on more than 20,000 square feet of intricate mosaics in the 1,800-year-old Bishop's Basilica should be finished.

My dad is surprised by the vitality of Plovdiv and its people. "It measures up to a modern European city, but still retains its

Bulgarian flavor," he says. He recognizes the vestiges of former Communist rule in its big gray multistory apartment buildings, but likes that newly remodeled buildings — and newly excavated ruins — are now the focus.

On our last evening in Plovdiv, my mom, Rob and I walk up to the broad, flat summit of our hill, called Nebet Tepe, to watch the sunset. We also find ruins of dwellings and fortifications that predate the birth of Christ. We're not a selfie family, but standing on the rubble of an ancient wall at the hill's edge, we snap one.

## Tales of palaces — and a cow

My dad knows more about Veliko Tarnovo's history than Plovdiv's. Most of the latter's ruins were discovered and studied after he fled the country. The former's history is the Bulgarian history he learned in the one-room Perilovets schoolhouse. Tarnovo was the country's capital during the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185-1393) and also at the beginning of the Third Bulgarian Empire in 1878 when Bulgaria won its freedom after almost 500 years of Ottoman rule.

My dad knows the names of some of the 19th-century rebels that Tarnovo's Monument to Hanged Rebels honors for advocating (and fighting for) Bulgarian independence from the Ottoman Empire. The constitution that governed the country when he was born was drafted and signed in the white, cross-shaped building down the street from our hotel. (Today, this building is the Museum of the Bulgarian Revival and Constituent Assembly.) He tells us about Russian Gen. Iosif Gurko, for whom our hotel is named. (Gurko's army liberated Veliko Tarnovo from the Ottoman Empire on July 7, 1877.) He tells us the four Ase-nevtsi Monument horsemen liberated Bulgaria from the Byzantine Empire in the 12th century, then ruled it as czars for most of the next century.

Even without my dad's details about the Bulgarian czars who lived in grand palaces on Tsarevets hill, the view of it from the sky walk, a glass-bottomed viewing platform that stretches out between buildings above the Yantra River, are impressive.

Little is left of the palaces but their foundations. A wall built to fortify the hill still stands. Its watchtowers are crenelated and the wall itself is as thick as 12 feet in some places.

Walking down Samovodska Charshiya street, which is home to the studios and galleries of many local artisans, we hear about my dad's favorite cow, Mininkata ("little one"). He says she was famous because she was an award-winning milk producer, and that, because of her, his father, whom my brother and I called "Dedo," went to jail. "The Soviets came for her and Dedo refused to let her go, so they put Dedo in jail and the family had to pay a huge ransom to have him freed," my dad says.

Over our drinks at the Ase-nevtsi Monument, after we've finished making the case for Tarnovo as Bulgaria's next European Capital of Culture, I thank my dad for sharing his history with us and tell him I'm sorry I was such a punk back in second grade.

Thankfully, when it's time to get another round of drinks, the bartender speaks English.

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JP NORRELL

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